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**Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature *An Introduction* by John P. Wright, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 336pp, ISBN 978052154589, \$29.99**

**Paul Sagar**

This is a noteworthy book from a noteworthy author, to mutually reinforcing effect. John P. Wright is that rare thing: a scholar with a sophisticated grasp of the complexity of philosophical argument who is also a serious historian of philosophy (with an emphasis on “historian”). These two things here combine to produce a beginner’s guide which doubles as a valuable scholarly contribution for more advanced readers.

Wright has succeeded in capturing the complexity of Hume’s arguments in the *Treatise* whilst maintaining a prose style which makes the material accessible, without disguising that readers must work hard to keep up. Particularly pleasing is the seriousness with which Wright treats Hume’s positions. Whereas some “introductions” give-in to the temptation to pass (usually dismissive) judgement on Hume’s arguments, Wright instead notes common objections before providing the more sophisticated Humean response, leaving readers to decide where to go from there. He is also scrupulous in making clear when he is taking sides in any interpretative debate (no infrequent thing in Hume scholarship). This is best exemplified in his meticulous discussion of Hume’s account of causation in the *Treatise*.

Wright correctly notes that the bulk of the “problem” of causation for Hume is *epistemological*; how we can come to “know” of causal connections in the external world. Providing a thorough and accurate exposition Wright follows Hume’s argument to the letter. Illustrating the powerful nature of the sophisticated epistemological scepticism in play, Wright accurately explains the intellectual force of the reasoning which leads Hume to suppose that our only basis for a belief in causal necessity resides in our own minds. Yet Wright notes that there is also an outstanding corollary debate in this area: that whilst Hume was intractably sceptical as to our ability to “know” of mind-independent causal connections, there remains the issue of whether he nonetheless thought causal connections obtained “out there” in an underlying reality, to which we do not have access.

On this “ontological” question Wright’s commitments are “realist”: that Hume believed there *are* necessary causal connections built into the fabric of existence, even if we can’t have direct access to them. Personally this is too quasi-Kantian a conclusion to deduce for my liking. I read Hume as thoroughly sceptical here, too: that the concept of “causal necessity” beyond observation of regularity and the attendant idea of necessary connexion in the mind is either incoherent or vacuous. To say that there is “causal necessity” “out there” in the “fabric of the universe” (or some such) is to attempt to speak of things of which we can have absolutely no coherent idea. The correct interpretation of Hume is not ontological “realism”, therefore, but a healthy sceptical withdrawal from the terms of a (terminally) confused engagement. Wright, however, is quite open about his own commitments and the alternatives available, and his footnotes provide ready ammunition for opponents and curious students.

Of particular interest to more historically-minded readers will be both Wright’s lengthy and detailed introduction, and his constant endeavour to situate Hume’s arguments

against a background of 18<sup>th</sup> century debate. Whereas many beginner's guides simply regurgitate basic biographical platitudes, Wright has taken the trouble not only to provide a detailed overview of Hume's early life but also to stress the possible connections between the young man and the later philosophy (if only slight later: Hume finished the *Treatise* when he was just 27). Notably, Wright's suggestion that Hume's early psychological breakdown – before the new “scene of thought” which inspired the penning of his masterpiece – was induced by a rigorous attempt to conform his life to the stoic moral teachings of Francis Hutcheson and Lord Shaftesbury specifically. Basing this claim not in idle speculation but in Hume's correspondence, Wright makes an important historical contention about the possible motivations for – and our interpretations of – Hume's repudiation of neo-stoic “moral sense” theories in favour of an epicureanism that placed pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance at the centre of human psychology. For those who wish to combine philosophy with history to good effect, Wright's is no trivial suggestion.

Indeed historical sensitivity is one of the most pleasing things about this volume, where intellectual context of Hume's arguments is always sketched. This is not only interesting in itself, but also helps both to illustrate Hume's rival commitments as well as guiding the reader towards interpretations that avoid retrospective conceptual anachronism. This is particularly important when Wright comes to discuss Hume's moral and political arguments in the second half of the book.

On one level, by locating Hume's intervention as a complex response to (amongst others) Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Bernard Mandeville, John Locke and Samuel Clarke, this book happily avoids the trap of becoming a narrow and tired discussion of Hume's arguments against ethical rationalism to the exclusion of all else. Whilst handling Hume's rejection of any moral realism derived from a faculty of reason with aplomb, Wright is also wholly alive

to the fact that Hume's real targets in the *Treatise* were the "moral sense" realisms of Hutcheson and Shaftesbury, and the sceptical moral egoism of Bernard Mandeville (and in the background, Thomas Hobbes). Accordingly, it is the responses to *these* authors which command the bulk of Wright's treatment – which is exactly how it should be, for that is how it is in Hume.

In doing so, however, Wright also makes a subtle yet important scholarly intervention as to the extent of *influence* upon Hume. The great student of Hume's thought, Norman Kemp Smith, famously claimed that Hume entered philosophy through the "gateway of morals" and that his moral and political thought were essentially an extension of Hutcheson's. This interpretation has been followed in recent years by David Fate Norton in particular, but Wright here aligns himself with scholars such as James Moore and Luigi Turco who emphasise the radical discontinuity between Hume and Hutcheson, with the *Treatise* constituting a thorough-going repudiation of the Glasgow professor. Wright further convinces me that the Kemp Smith interpretation must indeed be rejected.

It is worth briefly comparing Wright's volume to other high-quality beginner's guides currently available. Offering a more basic philosophical exposition is Simon Blackburn's *How To Read Hume*, which offers a lively romp through some of the "big themes" in Hume's philosophical corpus. Wright's book has the advantage of greater philosophical rigour and depth than Blackburn's much shorter introduction can achieve – though Blackburn's book is able to pursue and illustrate themes beyond the *Treatise* in a way not possible for Wright (including an interesting and original interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*).

At the other end of the beginner's-guide spectrum, Barry Stroud's *Hume* remains a worthy introductory text which is able to pursue Hume's epistemological commitments in

somewhat greater depth than Wright, particularly regarding personal identity, perception, and external-world scepticism. Yet Stroud's book has comparatively little to offer regarding Hume's theory of passion, politics and moral theory, where by contrast Wright offers detailed expositions. This better-reflects the extent to which these issues preoccupied Hume, whilst also indicating the highly-integrated nature of the *Treatise*. Furthermore – and as Paul Russell has noted in his *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise* – Stroud tends to over-emphasise Hume's naturalism at the expense of his simultaneously destabilising scepticism, a permanent and profound tension at the heart of the *Treatise*. Wright does a better job of bringing this to the attention of his readers, not just with regards to the understanding but crucially with regard to the status of moral judgements as well.

Insofar as a beginner's guide can be a *tour de force* it is fair to describe Wright's volume as such. It is, to my knowledge, probably the best introduction to Hume's *Treatise* – and by extension, Hume's philosophical thought – currently on the market. If you teach a course on Hume, or 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, or ethics, this should be on your reading list. For those just looking for a helpful place to start exploring one of the greatest works of philosophical genius ever produced, here it is. This is a book for all, and it deserves attention.

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